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ABSTRACT

Organizational theory offers rural school administrators several ways of thinking about retrenchment made necessary by declining enrollment. Obstacles to innovative responses to retrenchment include a shift in how organizations are perceived: from closed systems in which rational decisions are made about changes, to open systems in which administration is a highly politicized activity, with a tendency to favor encrusted organizational practices over innovative solutions. Under such conditions, rural school districts tend to cut back existing programs and services (the "efficiency" option). These difficult decisions are often postponed until no other visible alternatives are available. Some factors contributing to the choice of efficiency measures over innovation are that quantitative results are easier to ascertain; the most innovative members are the first to leave during difficult times; and, in such times, espousal of traditional values, including "core programs," predominates. To counteract these contributing factors, rural schools should establish priorities through planning, using such strategies as system development planning, quality circles, and opportunistic management. Approaches for improving delivery of programs include use of community members to assist teachers; new technologies such as computer networks; mobile laboratories for specialized courses/services; and shared services within/between school jurisdictions. Universities can help with teacher training specifically oriented toward rural practice. (MH)

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PROGRAM ORGANIZATION AND DELIVERY

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BY

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EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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While much attention has been given in recent years to problems of organizational retrenchment, the locus of this attention has been mainly urban, with little if any concern for rural settings. This neglect is somewhat ironic in view of the fact that enrollment decline has been characteristic of rural systems for a longer period of time.

A consequence of rural decline has been the need to design novel approaches to program organization and delivery systems. In addition, rural school boards have had to face the inevitable task of school closures.

The turmoil and agony surrounding decisions that become necessary when school enrollments and resources decline are not surprizing. The literature on retrenchment suggests only two real options: (1) get cracking and do something innovative or (2) cut back. For most administrators creative methods of capturing new clients and/or delivering services differently will not fill the vacuum created by demographic trends. Thus the most important issue is how best to approach the delicate tasks of cutting back services and of closing or merging schools. The field of organizational theory offers several ways of thinking about processes of retrenchment. I will summarize three of these and offer some ideas on how to transform the perils of decline into opportunities for renewal.

Obstacles to Innovative Responses to Retrenchment

Much of the literature on retrenchment argues that the current crisis in education should be seized as an opportunity to formulate innovative responses to declining enrollments. On the other hand, authors (e.g., Boyd, 1979) reporting actual responses to retrenchment portray a very different picture. Instead of experimenting with novel approaches, administrators are opting for piecemeal and conservative responses. In essence, in an attempt to economize educational organizations are basically doing less of the same (Sackney, 1981).

Whitten (1981) argues that three developments in organizational theory have influenced how administrators behave. First, organizations have increasingly been viewed as open systems. Open systems tend to focus attention on the role of boundary spanners that link internal operations with environmental constituencies. One of the important boundary spanning activities is obtaining and interpreting feedbacks. This information enables the system to make "adjustments" in its operation so that the organization is "more in tune" with the environment. This has led to the development of organizational models termed as being "responsive" or "self-correcting".

Second, administration in open systems is viewed as a highly politicized activity. According to this approach to decision making, internal and external groups vie for control over these latent means to advance their preferred values and objectives. The skill of the political administrator becomes that of determining each group's demand threshhold in return for its support (Pinnings and Goodman, 1977).

Third, decision making in organizations is characterized by tensions between the routine and the novel. The tendency for decision makers is

to become habituated to old programs and insensitive to the uniqueness of new problems (Cohen, March and Olsen, 1972). The result is that organizational practices become increasingly encrusted and problem solving is guided by precedent, expediency and convenience. According to this approach decisions become more political than rational.

Whitten (1981) contends that these three theoretical perspectives are complementary and together they represent a shift in orientation of organizational theory from a closed-rational to an open-political orientation. With this shift, administrators have moved from being problem solvers to being "crisis managers" or "fire fighters".

Deal (1983) uses similar conceptual lenses to view the decision making process in an era of decline. For Deal, the use of the rational approach would ensure that cuts occur among those programs, staff members, or facilities that are least effective.

The political approach, by contrast, is secret. Political strategies unfold in private, behind the scenes.

The third approach to decision making -- a symbolic approach -- emphasizes the importance of negotiations and sympolic interaction among various constituencies as avenues for building shared justifications for cuts and as opportunities for individuals to vent their anger and grieve their losses. Here again the administrator is guided by past experiences and expediency.

The utility of this shift from rational to political and symbolic can be better comprehended under conditions of decreased resources. Under such conditions administrators can either cut back or alter the mix of educational services. The first option reflects a passive orientation of

"weathering out the storm". Cutbacks generally take the form of trimming off the fat from existing programs or cutting back in the services provided. This approach is generally referred to as the efficiency option. Our research with small rural school districts leads us to conclude that this is the basic model being used (Sackney et.al, 1981; Newton et.al, 1982, Sackney, 1983).

In contrast, the second option focuses on program innovation to insure long-term effectiveness. Administrators, according to this approach, look beyond the system of resource decline and search for indicators of emerging trends or novel modes of delivering services. Interestingly, the move to a political orientation has resulted in more of the decisions being made by Boards as opposed to administrators. This, in turn, has caused more work for administrators.

Efficiency Responses

There are a number of reasons why administrators engage in conservative responses. First, under conditions of stress, administrators engage in less risk taking. The need to terminate employees, cut back in programs or services, or justify school consolidations to hostile parents produces feelings of frustration and anxiety. Because retrenchment decisions produce emotive reactions, administrators often get caught up in the affective components of the process. They tend to engage in anxiety reducing behaviours such as withdrawal, hostility, and aggression. The end result is that administrators avoid risky alternatives that might create additional apprehension and frustration.

Our research shows that both at the school and school system level difficult decisions are postponed until such time as no other visible alternatives are available. Staff cuts are usually made in one fell swoop without evidence of proactive planning.

Second, administrators trained in organizations with a history of growth and expansion are likely to respond to a decrease in resources as though it was a growth related problem (Shakeshaft and Gardner, 1983). That is, they tend to think and respond primarily in terms of organizational practices associated with past successes.

Third, the structure of educational organizations creates a bias against change. Because schools have been characterized as being "loosely coupled" systems, most organizational members push for maintaining the status quo (Weick, 1976). Ryan (1981), for example, argues that the constraints on program organization are exacerbated by teachers' collective agreements. An increasing number of agreements have mandated clauses related to pupil-teacher ratio, class size, workload and teacher surplus and redundancy. Change under these circumstances becomes less probable.

Fourth, educational organizations tend to focus on efficiency measures since these are easier to ascertain (e.g., pupil-teacher ratio, cost/pupil). The move to quantification can be seen by the use of performance indicators such as standardized testing, results-oriented outcomes, norm-referenced testing, and management by objectives, to name a few.

Fifth, during difficult times, the most innovative members are the first to leave (Levine and Hirschman, 1970). Not wanting to have their record marked by failure these people seek opportunities in more prosperous

organizations. Consequently, under these circumstances efficiency aspects of retrenchment are reinforced.

Sixth, during difficult times the espousal of traditional values predominate. In schools, what many consider to be the frill subjects and services are the first to go. Our studies note that second languages, physical education, fine arts, industrial arts and electives are the first to be cut from high school programs. Interestingly, the public supports this move towards "core programs".

Seventh, under conditions of seige from the outside, there is a tendency for the immediate environment to garner strong support to maintain the status quo. In the communities that we worked with, we found strong support to ensure the survival of "their" school (Ryan, Sackney and Birnie, 1981). Should the community school be considered for closure, quick hostile reactions can be anticipated. Consequently most administrators and boards are reluctant to consider such initiatives. Those districts that have not been successful in consolidating programs and/or schools tend to delay making similar decisions in the future.

And finally, during retrenchment the need for additional information and planning becomes paramount, yet most districts tend to engage in such activities to a lesser degree. This stems from the fact that many administrators and boards perceive poor planning to be the root of their problems in the first instance.

PROGRAM ALTERNATIVES

In the previous section it was argued that educational organizations are slow to respond under conditions of retrenchment. At this stage it may be useful to illustrate how schools might maximize their resources.

Prior to doing so, two points need to be emphasized. First, the responsibility for mounting these alternatives will have to be shared among various stakeholders involved in the educational processes. The potential for affecting these changes appear to be strongest at the local level. Secondly, we must face the reality that true equality of educational opportunity is unattainable. Smaller schools will always have program constraints, for there is no way that such schools can match the program offerings of their larger counterparts.

Need for Planning

Nevertheless, even small schools can offer excellent programs. School districts need to establish program priorities. Unfortunately, it is easier said than done, for planning activities involve new levels of co-operation among the various stakeholders, a task that reveals both strengths and weaknesses in the system. A number of different approaches are available to accomplish this end (See Department of Educational Administration, 1982).

System Development Planning is one such organizational concept (Smilansky, 1979). The concept requires association in leadership, responsibilities between political leaders, educational administrators and professionals who, in turn, share with the institutions and families concerned with education the responsibility for deciding what is desirable in terms of priorities, and in the context of community and school ecology,

for planning the program and evaluating its implementation and results.

Strategic planning processes that target certain networks are being utilized by larger urgan systems and certainly merit consideration by rural school districts at least in a modified form (Blacklock, 1982; Sackney, 1983). Most educational administrators would, however, require retraining in order to use such concepts.

The use of "Quality Circles" as a mode for developing program alternatives also warrants consideration. Ackley (1982) suggests that school districts that have used this approach have been able to tackle difficult problems with considerable success. The writer's limited experience with the concept would support this contention.

Another management technique that has potential is termed as "opportunistic management". Opportunistic management marries a redefinition of strategic planning to organization support realities. The strategic planning component provides both system and process to help administrators to identify and evaluate opportunities in light of various assumptions about how the world (macro-envionmental and competitive) may unfold. The organization support component deals with the challenge of implementation, considering identified opportunities with reference to internal strengths and weaknesses, and the balance and blend of human and system resources which can be realistically positioned in support of the goal structure. Opportunistic management attempts to ensure organizational renewal and growth.

Organizational Arrangements

Schools can maximize their resources in a number of different ways (Sackney, 1981). Modular timetabling arrangements based on the semester system, trimester or nine-week periods would provide greater flexibility. Other devices include the use of co-ed classes in areas formerly the domain of either males or females; stacking, or establishing "open" classes; multi-level classes, and offering courses only in alternate years.

Other mechanisms that have potential include the uses of persons from the community to assist teachers by performing a variety of non-teaching tasks and instructing in mini-units of work. Art, music, drama, agriculture, power mechanics and physical education are some examples of where the community-based persons could assist teachers.

Apple (1983) suggested that teachers need to redefine what schools offer - both now and for the future. Teachers will have to justify why they teach what they do. For rural schools this redefinition needs to take into account the constraints and circumstances that exist.

An area that has not been adequately explored is comprised of new technologies such as computers, videotex/teletext, interactive video (including video discs), communication satellites, multi-channel cable/fibre optics, teleconferencing (audio/video/computer), as well as new developments in television and video. Alberta Correspondence School, for example, has just completed and evaluated a Mechanics 12 Telidon Distance Education project. The pilot demonstrated that considerable program opportunities are possible using this media approach.

Another example that has potential for rural schools is the distributed computer network project being piloted by Edmonton Public

Schools. This project attempts to evaluate computer usage in schools as a management information system and as a teaching tool.

It should be stressed that rural school jurisdictions cannot deliver these services in isolation. Provincial Governments need to provide financial and program assistance to small schools. Regional and province-wide in-service for teachers and administrators will be necessary.

At the system level, various organizational arrangements are also possible. The establishment of multi-campus schools and the twinning of neighbourhing schools are possibilities. Schools located in close proximity can offer different specialties. Sharing can be divisional or between divisions.

Similarly, the use of mobile laboratories to offer certain specialized courses and services has been documented. For example, the use of a mobile counselling centre that offers services to a number of school jurisdictions has met with success. Other types of mobile laboratories include instruction in art, home economics and industrial arts.

Another area where sharing among school jurisdictions is advisable is in the provision of services to special education students. A study by Ryan, Sackney and Bernie (1981), for example, suggested the use of area service support systems.

In some cases it may be deemed appropriate to purchase services from another division or district. And in extreme cases two boards may find it more fruitful to amalgamate into one school jurisdiction.

And finally, school districts should not reject school consolidation where such makes sense. All too often rural school systems prefer to limp

along with poor program opportunities rather than close schools as a final resort.

Universities can also be of assistance to small schools. They can train teachers who are more generalists than specialists. Interns should be placed in small rural schools to prepare them for such teaching. It is also being suggested that teacher training centres provide students with experience that takes into account the special skills and differences required for small school teaching (e.g., multi-graded classrooms). Exposing and providing models for teachers in the use of new technologies is another area that Universities should pursue. Finally, Universities can make available mini-courses that prepare teachers in subjects for which they lack training.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The thesis of this paper is that educational institutions are, as a rule, adopting a passive response to retrenchment by treating it as a fait accompli. It is argued that this neglect of innovation is not the result of a lack of expressed concern for improving organizational effectiveness. Instead, it has been suggested that certain organizational dynamics lead administrators to exaggerate the curative powers of efficiency.

It should be pointed out that the author is not arguing against educational administrators increasing the efficiency of their organizations in response to resource scarcity. Obviously there is a need to prune the the excesses of the 1960's. However, the concern is that, if anything, the best creative energies of educational administrators must be marshalled

if innovation is to be stimulated during a period of retrenchment. This is obviously a challenging task. Administrators need to mount a two-pronged offensive. First, they must counter the efficiency bias which mitigates the use of more adaptive alternatives. Second, they must marshall the ingenuity of the organizational membership to formulate new modes of program organization and delivery. In this regard strategies such as strategic planning, quality circles and opportunistic management strategies were advocated. Additionally, various approaches from telidon to stacking of courses were suggested as methods for improving the delivery of programs.

It should be borne in mind that behind every crisis is an opportunity. What is required is the initiative to seize that opportunity.

LES:dgb
March 23, 1983

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